

# ~ The Road to Paradise ~

by Rhuarc Black

rh.black@hotmail.co.uk

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Disclaimer: These characters are original and mine. They are not based on anyone or anything.  
Warning: This is a short story, essentially a glimpse of a life at a crux. If you are religious, you might want to give this one a miss.

Description: When Elizabeth stands before the Mother Superior proclaiming her love for Lai, she never imagines how her stance will change the life of the woman before her and lead her down a different road than the one she has been walking for the last fourteen years.

Dedication: This story started one warm rainy night wandering the streets of London after hearing the song *Unsung Psalm* by T. Chapman. I am not Christian anymore and I was never a Catholic but I was born in a religious family in a religious country. I would not dare to imply that I can understand or even imagine what makes people take that road in their lives. I have never been able to understand it. I certainly never wanted anything like that for myself. This story is dedicated to a woman I love very much and owe very much to. I respect her need for such things although I cannot understand it. I am only grateful that she never had to choose between her religion and her heart. I love you and I am very proud of you, in spite of religion or beliefs, yours and mine. For Roula.

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The room is small and stuffy in the afternoon sun. The two men look at each other briefly before turning to the woman between them. The tall thin man clears his throat carefully before speaking in a voice filled with innuendo. "Mother Superior, I have to express my apologies for this occurrence. But as head of the school and..."

He never finishes as black eyes hard as onyx and cold as the night turn to him. The voice that answers him is even but colder, so cold that it makes him shiver. "Of course not, Father. The girl is one of mine after all."

He never gets the chance to answer as the knock on the door sounds loud in the room. The people outside do not wait for an answer and the door opens immediately. The first to enter is a heavy-set nun who nods briefly at the Mother Superior before standing aside letting a young woman in a habit and another nun enter behind her.

Mother Superior's voice is calm and quiet. "You may go, sisters. Thank you."

Silence reigns in the room as the two nuns leave with quick steps, closing the door behind them securely. Only when the door clicks shut does the Mother Superior look at the young woman standing in front of the long table. The silence stretches as the Mother Superior looks at the young woman carefully, noting with an almost audible sigh the fire and defiance in her eyes.

The Mother Superior is ready to speak when the tall thin priest at her right starts speaking.

Neither of the two priests sees the icy glint that enters the Mother Superior's eyes or the stillness that transforms her face into an impassive mask.

The first words of the priest boom in the room. "Do you not have the decency to even look remorseful? What you have done has brought the Lord's work into disrepute!"

The young woman's flinch is obvious to all but it lasts only for a split second before her shoulders are thrown back and fire dances in her eyes once more.

The priest's voice booms once more in the momentary stillness. "Have you no shame to break your vows to the Lord? To participate in such unnatural vices is a sin against the Lord. Have you no shame?"

As he stakes breath to continue, the young woman speaks quickly but evenly, "I am not ashamed, Father."

The priest almost launches out of his chair, his mouth working but the young woman has not finished. "I love Lai, Father, whatever you or God says."

The words bring a momentary hush in the room broken immediately by the priest's voice. "This is infamy! How do you dare take the Lord's name in such way? Like the whores of Gomora, you dare laugh at the Lord!"

He is ready to continue but before any sound escapes his open mouth, a deep calm voice interrupts. "Please, Father Carlos, that is enough."

Every eye in the room turns to the heavy-set priest sitting at the other end of the table. His voice is calm, collected and his eyes look squarely at the young nun standing defiantly in front of the table. "My dear, you are young. Please understand our concern. You have gone through a great stress. We can all understand. Out there things are not...easy. Sometimes temptation can prove too much."

His voice is mellow, full of understanding as he continues. "It is easy to be influenced under such stress. You are too young to see clearly...to fully understand how you can be...seduced...forced to do things. Things you never really wanted. My dear, believe me, everyone is tempted. You can come back to fold. It is not too late. The Lord forgives the young, the innocent."

The fire flares in young woman's eyes and her voice is low, full of strength and defiance. "How would you know what I feel, Father? Lai is a good woman. She did not influenced me! She certainly did not seduce me. And sure as hell, she did not force me to do anything. Don't you dare insult her in my presence!"

The priest's gasp is audible at the answer he did not expect.

The Mother Superior's eyes have not left the young nun in front of her for the whole time. Her face is impassive but her thoughts churn behind the façade. *Oh, Lord, forgive me. I should have*

*known. I should have seen it coming. She is so much like...like me. She has never been happy here. These walls stifle her. We stifle her.*

She glances at the priest next to her, a wave of anger building in her gut. *The same old routine. They have it down pat. Do they think I cannot hear the insincerity in their voices? Their boredom? Their sick glee? How do they dare think they know? They have never been out there. The Vatican is not Africa.*

With an effort, she forces the anger down, even as her gaze takes in the young nun standing defiant in front of her. *There is such fire in her, such bravery. Look at her, daring us all to speak. Such bravery...more than I ever had.*

Her voice is calm and even, betraying none of her thoughts. "Fathers, would you excuse us for a moment? I wish to speak to the sister in private."

Twin gazes turn to her, mixed surprise and anger. Cold hard eyes meet the priests' gazes and she can see them shrivel and retreat. The Mother Superior watches them leave. The ice never leaves her gaze. Not until the door clicks shut once more, does she turn back to the young nun still standing in front of her. Her voice is warm. "My dear...Elizabeth, talk to me."

The young nun's eyes soften and the Mother Superior can hear the tears in her voice. "Mother Superior, I am so sorry. I never wanted to disappoint you."

The Mother Superior's answer is almost immediate. "Then don't, my dear. In a few years all of this will have been forgotten and you can go on with your work. Memories fade..."

The words are barely out of her mouth before fire flashes in Elizabeth's eyes and her answer is shot back laden with anger. "You don't understand! I don't want this!"

But the Mother Superior keeps her voice calm. "This? You don't want to help the less fortunate, sister Elizabeth? Oh, child..."

The answer to the implied accusation is quick, quicker than she expected, delivered in a voice full of passion. "I love my work, Mother Superior. I want to be out there. But Lai can do that too, without...without all this! I love her, Mother Superior."

Elizabeth's voice falls at the last but then she goes on stronger. "Scorn me if you want but that does not change what I feel!"

The silence stretches as Elizabeth holds the Mother Superior's onyx gaze for long moments, willing her to understand. Finally the Mother Superior speaks once again. Her voice is warm but Elizabeth can hear the steel underneath the velvet tone. "I will ask you only one thing, child. Do not answer me in anger. Think and then answer."

The Mother Superior pauses for a moment, making certain that her words have sunk in. Only when Elizabeth nods slowly does she continue. "Were you forced in any way?"

She had expected a pause but the answer is immediate, explosive. "No! Mother Superior, you don't understand. Lai never touched me. I...I seduced her. I thought all these years that my work and my prayers would make it all go away."

Elizabeth's voice breaks then but she goes on in a hoarse whisper. "Mother, in Lai I see all the world is. She is brave and courageous. She is caring. I love her."

Elizabeth runs out of steam and her chest heaves with emotion. The Mother Superior looks at her, taking in the details, the depth of emotion reflected in sparkling brown eyes. She cannot help the fist that squeezes her heart.

*Brave, courageous, caring...* The words swirl in her mind as she tries to think. She knows she can press Elizabeth more. Show her the way more clearly. Mother Superior opens her mouth to do her duty, her duty to god and her church.

The vision assaults her before a sound leaves her parted lips. The same vision that seems to be permanently etched on the inside of her eyelids. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

Her fingers find the small scar on the inside of her wrist without conscious thought. It is faded almost to invisibility now but her fingers trace it from memory. The words she knows she must say have to be forced out of her mouth. Black eyes, a secret fire burning in them, look at Elizabeth.

Her voice is serious, almost grave. "What you do is sin. Do you understand that, child? The Lord sees all. You will never see His face."

Elizabeth's eyes rise to look at the Mother Superior and her voice is calm. "Maybe, Mother Superior. Maybe what the church says is true. But I don't believe that. The Lord sees all. If I am judged unworthy, then so be it. I will not turn from my life, not anymore."

The Mother Superior's voice is strong, gripping in its intensity. "Even when she leaves you, child? She will, you know. Such people are flighty."

Elizabeth's answer is quick. Delivered squarely to the Mother Superior's face. "You don't know that, Mother Superior. And even if Lai leaves me one day, I will not regret anything. This is my decision, my life. I love her and nothing will change that. Neither prayer nor time will change that."

Elizabeth's voice lowers. "I know you cannot understand. You are so far beyond such things. But, Mother, I can't be like you. Call me weak, a sinner. I don't care. I thought...I thought here I would find peace and a mission. But I cannot hide anymore. Not from the world. Not from myself."

The Mother Superior looks at Elizabeth. The pain almost chokes her but nothing shows in her face. *What can I say to that?* She knows she can continue, pressure as much as it takes. She knows the ways to make Elizabeth guilty, miserable.

The small voice in the back of her mind sniggers. *It will all be lies. Nothing more than lies. She thinks you a saint. Only because she doesn't know. You never had that kind of courage. You caved in long before this.*

Under the table her fist clenches hidden in the folds of her habit as she desperately tries to silence the mocking, accusing voice in her mind. But the torrent continues undeterred, her thoughts churning. *Do you want her to have your life? The loneliness? The tears? The empty prayers? The guilt?*

The Mother Superior looks at Elizabeth once again. The young nun's face is still defiant. The conviction pours out of her flaming eyes. Her nod is slow. "So be it then, child. I will not compel you. You have made your choice. You will have to leave the premises now."

Elizabeth look at the Mother Superior, her eyes full of tears, her voice choked, "Thank you, Mother Superior."

The Mother Superior stands quickly and walks to the door. "Follow me."

As she opens the door, her face takes on its customary mask of cold impassivity. Her eyes rack over the two priests waiting in the corridor. *They stand against the wall like the weasels they are,* her thoughts churn in barely concealed anger.

She has little patience with their kind. *The priests that supposedly care but never come to the school. That never visit the hospital except on official visits. The priests that purport to know all about it but have never seen the filth, the pain, the death at the missions.*

Her eyes are full of steel and ice as she pins them with her glare. Her voice is strong brooking no argument. "Miss Madel will be leaving us."

The tall thin priest opens his mouth to speak but the black raptor's gaze that meets his watery blue eyes stops all words from his mouth.

The Mother Superior's steps are quick as she leads Elizabeth away, not sparing another glance for the two priests, although she can hear their footsteps behind her. Her eyes look straight ahead as she walks through the corridors to the left wing of the dormitory and Elizabeth's tiny room.

The Mother Superior opens the door. Her eyes survey the small room quickly, taking in the carefully made bed and the tiny suitcase, still unpacked. Without a word she steps away from the door allowing Elizabeth to step inside and change. The silence in the corridor is stifling but she does not let her gaze fall as she meets the priests' eyes.

As the door opens, three pairs of eyes turn to look at Elizabeth. The woman that comes out of the

tiny room is not the same as the one that went in. Even in her ankle-length black dress, she looks free. With the hair loose around her shoulders, she looks ready and happy.

The Mother Superior almost smiles before she schools her features to her customary impassivity. She does not say a word and her eyes stop any words that the two priests would have wanted to say. She turns silently and starts walking down the corridor. Her steps are schooled from endless repetition and long years to find the way to the yard and the big double gates.

The Mother Superior leads the silent group through the long corridors, down the stairs, out into the large grass-covered yard and then on to the gates. Her eyes take in the young nun at her post by the gates talking with Sister Faith but she ignores them as they turn to look at her.

Her steps are quick and sure as she goes up to the gate and opens it with easy even movements. She waits without speaking as Elizabeth steps through the gate, her tiny suitcase in her hand. Her gaze stops the two men from following as she steps out from the convent grounds herself.

Her eyes are drawn to the lone car waiting on the other side of the narrow country road and the tall lanky figure that exits from the driver's door. She can only watch as the tall woman in faded jeans and a heavy jumper takes Elizabeth in her arms, her head bowing to kiss auburn tresses.

The voice is low but the Mother Superior can hear it over the sound of birds and the steady wind. "I was so afraid, Beth."

The answer is no more than a breath over a whisper. "I wouldn't leave you, Lai. You know that."

Her eyes have never left the couple in the middle of the road. She is slightly surprised as deep green eyes rise to look at her from a youthful face. The slight nod is so unexpected that she cannot answer with one of her own. She can only watch as the blond woman whispers inaudibly in Elizabeth's ear before stepping back and with strength born of long days in the sun takes the suitcase and moves toward the car.

Elizabeth turns slowly to look at the Mother Superior. Her steps are slow and hesitant but within moments she is standing before the Mother Superior. Elizabeth's voice is small. "Mother Superior, I know I cannot ask you this but..."

She pauses for a moment before taking a deep breath and plunging on. "Could you give me your blessing?"

Elizabeth is looking at the ground, not wanting to see the rejection in the Mother Superior's face. If she were not, she would have seen the slight widening of black eyes and the flash of pain that transformed the Mother Superior's chiselled features.

She stands stock still for long moments, her heart hammering in her chest. She knows she must not do this. She can feel the gazes of the two priests and Sister Faith burning holes in her back. Yet her hands move in the blessing of their own accord.

She can hear her voice. Its warmth a thing straight out of the past. "May the Lord watch over you, my child. Be happy, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth's eyes rise to meet her own, the tears flowing down her cheeks. Her words are barely audible over the wind. "Thank you, Mother Superior."

Her eyes never leave Elizabeth as the young woman turns from her and walks to the car. She watches as the tall woman opens the door for Elizabeth, a large hand steadying her as she enters the small car's confines. She can only watch as the tall lanky woman goes around the car and silently sits at the driver's side. The engine comes to life with a screech and within seconds the car is speeding down the narrow country lane. With a sigh, she turns from the road back to the convent.

Her heart clenches painfully in her chest. Her eyes close for a moment and the vision swoops down upon her. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

She can feel the sting of tears in her eyes. She is not surprised as she chokes them back. Tears are never far away. She has become so adept at keeping them back, letting them flow only at night.

She takes in the sprawling building of the convent for long moments but her eyes stray back to the road. She can still see the dust in the wake of the speeding car. Her eyes return to the convent and the bulky figure of the hospital behind it even as pain rends her heart. As always she tries to pray but once more there is nothing there. *There has been nothing there for fourteen years. Fourteen years...fourteen years.*

The vision takes her once again. No matter how hard she tries to stop it, the vision is always there on the inside of her eyelids as if it happened only yesterday. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

Her eyes take in the convent once more and the wide grounds of the yard. She can see the two priests looking at her from the other side of the gates and Sister Faith's feral eyes as they observe her. *Faith wants the superiority so much.*

Her lips move inaudibly in the familiar movements of prayer. The words roll off her tongue silently but there is nothing there. The words are empty. Her soul is empty. The vision hits her once more. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

Her black eyes meet Sister Faith's faded brown. *The woman wants it more than life, more than salvation. Why not let her have it? Why not? She deserves it more than I. At least it will make her happy.*

She raises her head to look at the sky. At the angry grey clouds that chase each other across the heavens. Her lips start another prayer. Just a few words leave her mouth before she stops abruptly. *There is nothing there.*

Elizabeth's words echo in her mind. *"I cannot hide anymore. Not from the world. Not from myself."*

Her own words mock her. *"The Lord sees all."*

She wants to laugh. It takes all her strength to choke the bitter laugh down. The vision comes to sweep her mind under once more. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

*The Lord sees all.* She thinks of the words of the scripture. *Let the one without sin cast the first stone.* Her hands find the small cross on her chest. She looks down at the tortured body of the man on the cross. *For the sins of mankind.* The one without sin who sacrificed himself for the sins of others.

An errant thought crosses her mind before she can clamp down on it. *I wonder did His eyes darken when the crowd called for Barabas?*

She looks at the convent once more. The small windows that barely let the light inside. The shadowed eaves. This was her life for the last fourteen years. She never went back to Africa. She trained others, so many others, to go there, to treat patients, to help in operations, to hold dying children as they left this life. But she never went back.

The world was hers. She knew that. Europe and America, all the rich places in the world were hers. But where she always wanted to be was out of bounds. Africa, the Middle East, the jungles of the east. Where people died from horrible diseases, where children starved, where war raged.

*Africa...* How could she look upon the savannah without waiting for the tall figure to come out of the low fog? How could she look at another makeshift hospital and not expect the unruly hair and the muscular frame to come out of the door?

She was out there somewhere, in some forgotten corner of the world. Strong hands, bloodied to the elbow, sutures held securely. Gentle hands, whipping sweat from a fevered brow.

As always the memories cannot keep the vision away for more than a few moments. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

She looks at the convent. At its strict Victorian lines before her eyes stray to the small crowd on the other side of the gate, the two priests, Sister Faith, the young nun at the gatepost. Her eyes fall down to her hand and the man on the cross. *The Lord sees all.*



There is a prayer on her lips as always but it is empty. *Why would the Lord hear? Hide from yourself. Hide from the world. How can you hide from God?*

Her eyes look at the small scar on her wrist, the almost invisible white line. The only reminder she has left, that and the pen.

The vision returns with a vengeance. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

This time her mind torments her further. *Tall form, muscular shoulders, short unruly locks moving as she walks to the table. The pen out of her pocket, the pen, that pen. Large strong hands flat on the table on top of the papers. Blue eyes, dark with pain, look up, meet teary black, the pain flares. Head bows, hand steady, signature written in bold strokes. The pen allowed to fall. It hits the table with a dull thud. Back, ramrod straight, as she turns to the door. Large strides out of the room, not a look back.*

She looks at the convent. She turns back to the road. Even the dust is settling. As the last few particles of dust settle on the dark earth, something snaps in her heart, something bursts in her mind. There is no thought as she walks through the gates with large strides.

The tall priest starts to say something but the steel in black eyes turned his way stops him in his tracks. She does not speak. She does not look at him for a moment longer as she walks away. Her steps take her without guidance up the wide stairs, through the long corridors to her office.

Her voice is low as she addresses the young nun that assists her. "Let no-one disturb me." She enters her office and sits on the hard-backed chair without even a glance at the young nun that closes the door quietly. Her sigh echoes in the empty room as her eyes travel to the small window and the glimpse of grey skies outside.

She knows the vision is coming and her heart clenches in anticipation of the pain that streaks through her like a thousand knives. *Oh, Bobbie, would you ever forgive me?*

The vision rips through her. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

The tears want to come but she blinks them back. Her eyes roam her office, her empty office. Full of paper and files but empty of her, of anything that resembles her. Her hands clench in her lap as an unexpected memory hits her. *"Do you want this, Maggie?", voice deep, strong, full of care.*

*Oh, Bobbie.* Her eyes are full of steel as her hands, steady as a surgeon's, open the topmost drawer, taking out the heavy paper. Her movements are sure. No hesitation mars her copperplate letters.

She does not need to think. She knows exactly what is supposed to be there. She has written it in her mind so many times. The words on the page stare back at her, daring her.

All that is missing is her signature. She looks at the empty space over her name. With a steady hand, she signs with a small flourish.

There is a slight tremble to her hand as she pushes the button that turns on the intercom. Her voice is hard as rock. "Sister Mary, come in, please."

Her eyes do not turn to look at her assistant as she enters hesitantly. "Call Cardinal Molieri, sister. And leave the door open."

She can hear Mary's gasp at the coldness of her voice but she does not turn as the assistant leaves the room. The phone rings quickly and she grabs it without delay.

Her voice sounds loud in the silence. "Your holiness? Sister Margaret here...yes, I am well. Thank you, your holiness. How is Rome?...Forgive me for disturbing you. There is something you should know...No, no, I am well... Your holiness, my resignation will be at your desk in a couple of hours. My deputy will take care of things until you decide on a replacement. She is more than capable for any position."

The silence falls heavy as she listens to the gravely voice on the other side of the line. Her answer is terse. "The girl left...Yes... I gave her my blessing...Why? Why not, your holiness?"

Another lengthy silence ensues. She can see the shadows outside her door but she ignores them. Her voice is strong, "I do not know, your holiness...Yes, I am leaving...Where to? Africa, of course...Exactly? I do not know, your holiness...A mission? I doubt it, your holiness. I sincerely doubt will find what I am looking for in a mission."

Another lengthy silence as she listens to the slightly agitated voice on the other side of the line. "No, your holiness... Not yet... Of course I know what I am doing, Cardinal!"

She listens silently at the deep voice that seems to get more and more agitated by the second. Her eyes find those of Sister Faith at the door. The faded brown eyes hold curiosity. She signals the sister in with a wave of her hand. She does not care any more. *Faith has heard that much, let her hear the rest. What's the difference?*

Something in the Cardinal's words brings her attention back to the phone. Her answer is strong but thoughtful. "Your holiness...Yes, I know the Lord sees all. I learnt something today... What? Oh, that the Lord does not listen to cowards...No, Cardinal! I said no, your holiness...I am leaving today. Right now!"

The silence is broken by the shouted bitten off words on the phone. Her voice is quiet but there is steel in it. "Your holiness... I am leaving now for Africa, or wherever else Bobbie is... Sire, I am leaving... I don't care! As a nun or a woman, I am leaving... Yes... I told you, your holiness, I don't care! I have left it for too long."

The Cardinal still speaks but she has no wish to hear any more. Her voice is strong, cutting through the rapid words. "Goodbye, your holiness."

As she slams the phone down, she can hear his voice still speaking on the other end of the line.

Steely eyes turn to sister Faith. She can see her wide eyes, her surprise, her horror. Her voice is soft. "Consider yourself acting Mother Superior, Faith. They may give it all to you but I cannot know."

She sees the comprehension, the desire for the position. She cannot help the laughter that bubbles in her lips. At Faith's shocked glance, she has to stop but there is still laughter in her voice as she tries to explain. "I never wanted this you know. All I ever wanted was to be out there. Doing what I was trained to do."

She can see the surprise, the incomprehension. She knows that Faith cannot understand. She has never been out there. She has never wanted to.

"Sister Margaret," Faith whispers.

The brown-eyed woman never gets the chance to finish what she was saying. "Just Margaret now, Faith."

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, she realises she does not wish to speak any more. *What more is there to say?* With quick sure movements, she stands. With a bare nod at Faith, she walks out of her office with confident strides.

She never looks back to see the two women exchanging shocked glances. Her steps are quick as she traverses the corridors to the small room that has been her home for the last fourteen years. As she opens the plain wooden door, she allows her eyes to roam the space inside. She cannot help the wave of sadness that assaults her senses.

Fourteen years in this room and it seems like there is nothing of her residing here. No photos, no little mementos, no memories. Merely a narrow bed, a small dresser and an old wardrobe. There is nothing in this room that she owns. Nothing that she can call her own.

Her eyes find the cross on the wall over the narrow bed and she sighs. How many times has she spent on her knees praying in front of the simple wooden cross? With a rueful shake of her head, she heads towards the old wooden wardrobe. She opens the wardrobe but she knows already that there is nothing there that she really wants. With shaking hands, she takes out the small purse at the back of the top shelf and the black dress folded neatly next to it.

The purse is light but it does not surprise her. She knows what is inside. Still she opens it, making certain that everything she needs is there. Her bank card. Unused but holding the few thousands of pounds that is her inheritance from her mother. Her passport. Her card that proves she is a qualified nurse. The papers that show that she has had her jabs recently.

The tiny glint at the bottom makes her hand clench. She does not take the pen out of the purse. It has stayed there for long years, her reminder, her comfort.

Her hands are steady as she removes her headdress, folding it with the movements born of long practice and endless repetition. Her habit is next. It is folded cleanly and left on the dresser.

She clenches her fists to stop her hands from trembling as she unfolds the old black dress. With a deep breath, she puts it on. The dress is a tad narrow at the hips and she shakes her head. *Behold the wonders of aging.*

Her eyes stray to the tiny mirror on the dresser and she looks at the face of a stranger. The small lines around her eyes. The sunken cheeks. The spattering of white in her hair. She observes her own eyes and she cannot help a grimace at their hardness.

The deep voice full of desire sounds in her memory. *"In your eyes, I can see my soul." Ah, Bobbie, what would you see now?*

With a sigh, she looks around the room once more. There is truly nothing of her there. Nothing to pack. Nothing to show for fourteen years of life. The only thing she possesses that she cares about is in the bottom of the purse. The gold pen. The only thing she managed to salvage from that fateful day.

They never knew she had taken it. Even if they did they would not know it for what it was. They had taken away everything. Not that there was much even then. The cassette from the truck. A shirt she had borrowed during the rains. The small book of poetry. Indecent they had called them. She looks at the room once more before shrugging and turning away.

She shrugs as she walks through the corridors barely seeing the sisters and the attendants around her. She knows where she must go. *To London and the centre. There they will know where Bobbie is and maybe... just maybe...*

The journey to London took the better part of two long days. The trains were awful as usual and the constant rain did not help. The walk through the busy streets of the metropolis is not easy. London is a huge city.

Finally she looks up at the small building. The centre. Today people live differently but the centre is still the one place aid workers from all over the world recognise as home.

For a moment she stops just outside the door. There are people who know her here. She has to wonder will they recognise her without her habit, her headdress. With a deep breath she opens the door and steps in.

The girl at the small cramped reception looks at her with narrowed eyes. Her voice is high pitched, almost nervous. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

She has to clear her throat before she answers. *How many years since someone did not call her*

*Mother Superior or sister?*

Her voice is calm and even, schooled from long years of training. "I would like to speak to Dr. Obai."

Her calmness seems to have paid off as the girl responds quickly. "Your name, please." "Margaret Foster," she can hear the slight tremble in her voice.

As the girl speaks on the phone, she looks around. The centre has changed. There is nothing she recognises here. But then again she did not expect it to be the same. Fourteen years in a long time. Still she relishes the hub of noise around her. That has not changed. As long as there were people that needed help, the centre would always be noisy and full of bustle. Here things happen, real things to real people.

Hasan's voice is almost shrill as he steps into the small foyer. "Mother Superior. How are you? Come in, please come in."

Margaret smiles indulgently. Hasan is exuberant as always. She allows him to lead her to his office, full of papers and with only a tiny bit of light coming through the window looking out towards the dingy street. His smile is genuine as he leads her to a chair and she sits gratefully.

"Would you like some tea? Some coffee? What are you doing here? How can we help the Holy See?" he asks in an avalanche of words.

She tries to keep her voice calm. It is never easy to resist Hasan's habitual enthusiasm. "No, Hasan, I am fine. The Holy See can take care of itself."

At her words, she can see his eyes narrow as he turns like the whirlwind to look at her. His words are hesitant. "Mother, are you well?"

She cannot help but sigh. "I am fine, Hasan. Better than I have been in years. And...it's only Margaret now."

His gasp is audible as he looks her over carefully realising what is missing. The question is out of his lips before she can contemplate an answer. "What happened, Mo... Margaret?"

She can only look at him trying to find words. *He does not know.* She is certain of that. *How can he know?*

Her voice is quiet. "I quit, Hasan."

She knows what is coming but she cannot help the flinch as his words reach her. "What? Why?"

The sigh escapes her lips before she can stop it. "Let it be, Hasan. Too long a story."

Her eyes find the dim light outside the tiny window and stay there, almost lost in the greyness

outside.

She never looks at him to see the compassion in his eyes. The remembrance of the sadness that he has always felt when he looks at her. The sadness that reflects the emptiness. The empty coldness that has shrouded her for as long as the man has known her.

His voice is gentle. "How can I help you, Margaret?"

She turns to speak, to ask the question her heart desires but the crush of the door opening stops her. The man that enters the small office is small, light-boned and blond but the anger is clear in his face. "Hasan! Where is my nurse? What's wrong with you man? We need the people out there!"

She can only watch as Hasan sighs and the sadness and regret colour his deep voice. "Fred, there is nothing we can do. We simply do not have any nurses. Not with the situation in the Middle East. You will have to wait."

The calm words only serve to fuel the young man's anger and his voice rises. "What do you mean wait? I have a camp full of sick and injured. The rebels are not playing out there. I have no nurses, just aid workers for fuck's sake. God! Bobbie is all alone out there, man! We need a nurse. Even a trainee. Please, Hasan..."

At the end his anger has been spent and his voice colours with entreaty. But Margaret has missed his last words. Did she hear right? *Oh Lord*, the prayer starts unbidden in her heart with no words from any prayer book. *Oh Lord, can this be?*

She stands on rubbery legs and opens her mouth to speak but only a croak comes out of her suddenly parched lips. As the man turns to look at her, the surprise clear in his eyes, she swallows painfully trying to find her voice.

He speaks first, his tone apologetic. "Excuse me, ma'am. I did not realise you were here."

Her voice feels weak. "Where are you based, mister...?"

His answer is quick and clear. "Nicholson. Fred Nicholson. I am very sorry to have barged in like this, Ms..."

Her words sound far away, like under water but she tries to keep the breathlessness out of her voice. "Foster...Margaret Foster."

"My apologies, Ms. Foster," he apologises once again.

She shakes her head. His apologies do not concern her. "No need, Mr. Nicholson. You said you needed nurses?"

She stands still the heart beating in her chest as she waits for his answer. The man looks at her,

hope shining in his eyes. "Yes, Ms. Foster. It is a minor conflict. Nothing for the UN to get all hot and bothered about. But people are dying out there. And...we have no nurses."

She looks at him, the blood pounding in her ears. It will sound weird but she needs to know. "I assume you have a doctor?"

Fred nods immediately. "Dr. Roberta Rutherford. She is very experienced."

She has to lock her knees to keep them from folding. She clears her throat painfully, trying to make her voice even. "Mr. Nicholson, you have a nurse now."

She can see Fred's eyes almost tear with gratitude when Hasan interrupts, the concern clear in his voice. "Mo... Margaret this is not safe. This is a very nasty conflict. No-one can guarantee your safety there. The Holy..."

She cuts him off with a curt gesture. "There are no guarantees out there, Hasan. And..." She pauses, looking straight in his eyes. "There is no-one who would stop me."

Hasan looks her, at the steel in her eyes. He does not know what is going on. But he respects this woman. She has been a foremost activist, dedicated, passionate. For the ten years of their acquaintance, ten years of conferences, meetings and lobbying, he has admired her.

Why leave the church? He does not know. He is not certain if he wants to know. He cannot stop the sigh from leaving his lips. There is a wild light in her eyes now. The sadness is there still but there is an energy, something different in the woman he sees in front of him now and in the Mother Superior he saw in Geneva just three months previously. "Do you have your papers? Have you had your jabs?" he asks quietly.

Margaret nods silently even as she takes her card and statement out of her purse. As Hasan bends his head to read them, Fred speaks up, his voice tight. "Thank you, Ms. Foster. You don't know how important this is to us."

Margaret smiles at him, inclining her head in a slow nod. Hasan's voice stops whatever she had been about to say. "These are alright. I will take care of the papers for you."

He stands up and leaves without a word, only a quick glance at Margaret. As she opens her mouth to ask for some more details, Fred speaks as he opens his mobile phone. "I should call Monique. To let her know we got someone."

He is intent on his phone call or he would have seen the blood leaving Margaret's face.  
*Monique? Oh, Lord.*

Fred's voice sounds loud in the quiet room. "Can I speak with Miss Calveston, please? Fred Nicholson here...Hey, Monique. Fred here...Yeah, I am fine. I am down at the centre. I found a nurse...Yeah, registered. With experience... Hasan says her papers are ok. Aha...Margaret Foster...Yes...Sure... ok."

As he closes the phone, Margaret's throat has closed, stale breath burning in her lungs. His smile is wide. "Miss Calveston says welcome aboard."

Margaret has to purse her lips to keep her sigh from escaping. *Monique did not recognise the name. Thank you, Lord.*

Time passes quickly as they wait for Hasan's return. Fred is telling her about the field hospital and the nasty little conflict. She nods at the right points, asking the right questions almost without thought. She never notices whether it is minutes or hours before Hasan returns. The papers in his hands are signed and ready.

As she puts them in her purse, she turns to Fred. His smile is wide, relief in his eyes. "Ms. Foster again I want to thank you. You cannot know how much this means to us. I will have your tickets with me at the airport. We are taking the 05.30. I hope that's ok with you?"

She smiles at him. Words have deserted her. *Back to Africa.* Her mind feels numb. *Back to Africa and... Bobbie.* Finally the words come to her, filled with conviction. "I will see you at Heathrow, Mr. Nicholson."

His smile is warm. "Please call me Fred."

She smiles back. "Only if you call me Margaret."

He nods and grips her hand in a firm handshake that she returns. As Fred leaves, she looks at him smiling. Hasan's clearing of the throat makes her turn to face him. The questions are clear in his eyes. For a moment she considers answering them. *But what's the point? Hasan is a good man. He would probably try to understand.* But it was not something she wants to explain. With a quick nod and a fleeting smile, she leaves.

The rest of the day is a whirlwind as she travels around the centre of London gathering what she needs. The clothes she did not have, sunscreen and insect repellent. Her feet move from shop to shop. Her hands wander from shelf to shelf without a thought. Her mind seems to know exactly where to go, what to do, as if she never stopped. By the time she is finished, it is late.

She knows she should sleep. Get a hotel room and lie down for a few hours. The backpack is heavy. The strap digging into her shoulders. With a shake of the head, she enters the Underground. The train to Heathrow is late but finally she is on her way.

The airport is almost empty. It is too late. There are only a few people waiting for the early flights. She can feel the smile appearing on her lips as she spies her flight on the board. With a sigh, she lets her backpack down and sits on the plastic uncomfortable seat. *Africa!*

She must have slept for a bit. She blinks trying to push sleep away as a hand on her shoulder shakes her "Margaret?"



Her heart speeds up at the voice and she opens her eyes to meet cold green looking down at her. Margaret sits up groggily and slowly gets to her feet. Her voice is low. "Monique."

The woman in front of her in the expensive business suit looks at her expressionless. Margaret squares her shoulders for the confrontation she knows is coming. Monique's voice is low, almost a growl. "I was hoping it would be a mistake. When I heard the name, I hoped it would be a mistake. I called the convent. They said you were taking an extended vacation."

Margaret looks at her without saying a word. *What is there to say?* She would be on that plane at five-thirty one or the other. Either as a new nurse or just as a woman, she would be on that plane. That much she had decided on the train ride to the airport.

Monique's green orbs drill into her. "What do you want, Mother Superior? What are you looking for?"

Margaret can see the contempt, the hatred in her eyes. She does not speak. She does not want to fight with Monique. They had been avoiding each other for all these years. Not Monique's fault. The blame was only hers.

Monique had warned her that late summer night in a voice that rang with worry. *"Are you sure, Maggie? This could get ugly." Oh Lord, forgive my arrogance.*

She almost starts to pray but something stops her. The prayer will fall on deaf ears. She is certain of that. *God does not listen to cowards.* Monique's grip on her shoulder is painful. "What do you want? Have you not destroyed her enough? What more do you want?"

She can feel the anger building in her gut. She knows Monique has every right but her arrogance, her pride spur her on. But she will not succumb, not this time. Monique's words hurt her to the depths of her soul. *Have I destroyed Bobbie? No! Bobbie is strong. She has always been strong.*

She can feel her heart shrivel as the vision rips through her. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?"*

Something must have shown in her eyes because Monique takes a step back. "Maggie?" The nickname that no-one uses any more, not for sister Margaret, the Mother Superior. Margaret looks at the woman in front of her. The voice that sounds in her ears, she does not recognise at first only to realise it's her own. "How is she, Mon?"

As Monique looks at her closely, her eyes narrow. Margaret can see the tiny lines in her face. *Oh, how the years have passed.*

She is looking at Monique's face and she cannot help the sadness that floods her heart as she sees Monique's guard coming up. The green eyes grow cold and distant. The words are clear and sharp. "She is well, working, saving lives. That's what she does, you know?"

She knows she will not get anything else out of Monique. This is her punishment, Monique's contempt. The bitter laugh almost chokes her as she tries to keep it inside. No-one's contempt can be greater than the one she sees every time she looks at the mirror. *But it hurts. It hurts so much.*

Monique's eyes rack over her, cataloguing her from head to toe. "Why, Maggie?"

Her voice is strange almost choked. Margaret looks at her. *What is she asking? Why what? So many whys. Why is she here? Why now? Why after all these years? Or the greatest why of all? The why she has pondered in the silence of the night and her tears all these years. The why that has haunted her throughout? Oh Lord, why?*

She could still remember the bishop's words. *"This is not you, sister. You have been corrupted. No, sister, I am certain Dr. Rutherford had something to do with it. But I have to ask you, Margaret. How did you stop believing? What did she say to sway your faith?"*

Oh, how she had cried then. The threats, the fear, the pressure, they were the least of the torture.

Now she can look back and see the idiocy of it all. She had chosen god over love and what had she found? Fourteen years of empty prayers, of nightmares. Of visions bleeding her heart dry. Always the same. The same. Her own thoughts come to her. *Choose God over love? How much of a fool can I be? If I had chosen God, why do my prayers remain unanswered? My prayers should have been answered.*

They asked her to choose. But God did not come into it. Her eyes found Monique's and the words slipped out before she could stop them. "I am sorry. So sorry."

Monique's voice is like gravel. "Sorry? You are sorry? Do you have any idea what you did? Go back to your nunnery, Margaret! There is paradise right around the corner. You don't want to lose that, do you?"

Margaret can feel the familiar anger stirring. "I will be on that plane, Mon! Whether you like it or not."

Green eyes look at her, voice low. "I will not stop you, Margaret. I made a promise. I will keep it, stupid as it is."

The dread that grips her heart brings the words gushing from her lips. "A promise? What promise?"

Monique pins her with a stare full of pity and hatred. Her voice sounds distant. "Bobbie made me promise. If you needed anything, I would provide. I would not deny you, not for her sake." A pause and then the low voice fills with feeling. "You don't deserve her. You never did!"

As Monique turned and left, her heels clicking on the airport floor, Margaret felt empty. *Bobbie had asked Monique to help her? When? It could not have been after... Oh sweet Jesus, no.*

Monique's words replay in her mind. *"I would not deny you, not for her sake."*

Tears sting her eyes and before she can push them down, one escapes her closed eyelids to travel down her cheek. *Oh, Bobbie, how can I face you?*

The vision rips through her once more, tearing her soul apart. *Blue eyes darkening in pain as they realise the betrayal. Blue eyes steeling, shoulders thrown back, a bitter half-smile, deep tones, bitter chuckle. "Yes, it's all true as you said it, priest. Where do I sign?" Oh, Bobbie...*

The flight is cold and long. Her eyes close inadvertently somewhere over the Mediterranean. The lack of sleep, the tiredness, the ache in her heart sweep her under. Fred's hand on her shoulder wakes her up with a gasp. "We are almost there, Ms. Fo...Margaret."

She nods at him but her eyes are already searching for the sight of the continent under the plane. The savannah sparkles under the clouds. *Africa! Africa and...Bobbie.*

As the plane lands, she takes in the sight. The dirty blue sky, the scattered clouds, the dust swivelling in the distance. As the door opens, the smells waft in. The stifling heat, the feel of home. Her heart seems to know it all. Her body adjusting almost instinctively.

She follows Fred into the small building of the terminal, barely seeing anything, merely feeling. A man is there to meet them, Fred has already told her that someone is waiting for them and the provisions they bring. A voice booms out Fred's name and she flinches.

At the words, she feels like every whip in the world flays her. *It would have to be Jack. Who else?*

She does not turn, although she can hear the greetings exchanged by the two men. Fred's voice brings a shiver through her. "And this is our new nurse."

Jack's voice booms. "I thought you had problems."

Fred's exuberant answer full of enthusiasm. "We were lucky at the eleventh hour. And such an experienced nurse as well, Jack."

His voice is deep. The sounds of Ireland still thick on his lips, as he bends to take her backpack. "Miss, I am honoured to meet you. My name is Jack O'Hagan. Please, let me take that."

A large beefy hand is on her backpack. Margaret stops the hand before the pack is lifted. Slowly she turns. "Hi, Jack."

The look in the man's washed-out blue eyes is ice, his voice raspy. "Margaret?"

She has no time to react as Jack turns abruptly, his hands on Fred's throat. The young man is lifted from the ground by hands intent on squeezing the life from him. "What the fuck is this, Nicholson? You think this is a joke?"

Fred is red as he chokes, his mouth opening and closing convulsively. The sight of his eyes bulging as he desperately tries to suck air into his lungs brings her out of her stunned immobility. Her hand is on Jack, gripping his shoulder. "Let him go, Jack! He has nothing to do with this. For goodness' sake, Jack, he is just a boy. Let him go."

Jack looks at her, his eyes wild, but finally he lets the young man down. Fred is looking at them terrified, his hand on his almost crushed throat.

"You," Jack spits out. "You! What the fucking hell are you doing here?"

Her eyes roam over him. He has aged. He is still burly and strong, a bear of a man, but there is white on his temples and deep lines on his tanned face.

"Keep your voice down, Jack," she says quickly as she spies people looking at them in surprise and question.

Anger is evident in his words but at least his voice lowers. "Keep my voice down? Don't you dare tell what to do you...you..."

She can feel the words ready to fly out of his mouth, his fists clenching to keep them from his lips. A devout Catholic. She knows he would never address a nun that way. With a shake of his head, he speaks tightly. "The plane will be leaving in a few hours. I will get you a seat."

Her own voice is strong full of steel. "I will not be on that plane, Jack. Don't waste your money or your contacts."

He looks at her, eyes hooded. "What are you doing here, sister?"

She looks at him, deep into his eyes. *How to answer that?* Her voice is low. "My job, Jack."

His laughter is bitter. "Your job? Your job is in Berkshire, not here."

She throws her shoulders back, her eyes flashing in anger. "My work is here, Jack. It has always been here!"

Jack's eyes narrow for a second before widening in surprise. Her eyes are hard agates of night as she looks at him defiantly.

"You've come back," he chokes out finally.

She can see the pain, the contempt and, yes, the fear and the hope in his eyes. She can only nod, her eyes falling to the floor.

A calloused but gentle hand comes to her chin, lifting her head slightly, hope kindling in his gentle blue eyes. "Are you sure, Maggie? Absolutely certain? Not like..."

She knows what he is saying, what he is referring to. That moment all those years ago. When they had stood thus once more as a devout Catholic had asked a young nun. *"Are you sure? About this? All of this?"*

Then she had answered without thought, without knowledge, with nothing more than the conviction born of instinct and pride. And Jack had believed her. Only to be betrayed by her, like Monique had been betrayed, like...Bobbie.

Black eyes turn inward. *Are you doing the same thing again? Are you going to run? Be a coward once more?* The doubt makes her shiver but she thrusts it away quickly.

She knows the answer now. Berkshire, Jack had said. But that was not work, it was merely a dream, an escape.

Her work was here, in the dusty settlements, demolished by war, torn by poverty, blanketed by hunger and disease. Her life was here, her life that had stopped fourteen years ago. Here, in Africa, her life had stopped. In a limbo, she had gone all over the world. In a limbo, she had been in England, in a limbo and nothing more.

Like a patient in a coma, unknowingly the days had passed and then the months and the years. Here under the harsh unforgiving sun, she could feel life in her once again. In her heart, she could not dare deny it anymore. Her life was here, in the poverty, the disease, between death and newly created life. Here, on the edges of the savannah, where a pair of blue eyes shone with the morning sun.

She looks into Jack's eyes and her voice is a voice she has not heard in the better part of a lifetime. "Yes, Jack. I am here. For good. If...if you'll have me."

At the last her voice breaks, she cannot say what she means. Even the possibility chokes the breath from her lungs leaving her gasping. Jack knows. The knowledge is there in the fire of his eyes. He knows what she is not saying: if Bobbie will have her.

A part of him wants to speak out, give the reassurance he can see Margaret craves, but he cannot. Not because he does not know but because he does. He tries to remember. *How long has it been? Fourteen years, fifteen?*

He's been here all this time. He's got married and had kids in that time. He's been by her side all this time. Through the days of bleakness, the months of anguish, the years of pain, of loneliness. *Ah, Bobbie... poor Bobbie never returning, never leaving.*

*She never leaves Africa now. She should be. There should be conferences and meetings all over the world. But not for Bobbie. Bobbie stays here, in Africa, at the edges of the savannah, where the memories are.*

*Different parts of the continent but the unrelenting sun, the blanketing fogs, the insanity of the*

*rains, the blueness of the sky as the sun rises over the savannah is all that she has known for more than a decade. Here, where the memories are.*

He has watched mutely all these years the terrible burden, the loneliness, the lone figure walking the edges of the camp at night. He has been there as the days pass without a break, without a moment to rest, from one crisis to another.

*Others go home, get a bit of time off, recharge the batteries, get a life before the lure calls them back. But not Bobbie Rutherford.*

The whispered admission one night when they both thought they'd die haunts his thoughts. As they sat shivering under the nozzles of the AKs, he had dared ask the question none of them had dared ask all those years. *"Why? Why stay?"*

The silence had stretched. He never believed he would get an answer. And then the whispered admission that barely reached his ears. *"I can pretend here. I can pretend nothing ever happened. That she's gone just to get supplies or is over at the next village for a birth or something. That she is in the cabin waiting. That as the light changes from night to day, she will come out and call me inside".*

He can only nod at Margaret as he grasps the backpack, lifting it easily. His voice is even. "We have a truck with supplies waiting."

With a last glance he turns to go and all Margaret can do is follow. She has to steady Fred who looks at her with a million questions in his young eyes. What can she say? How can she explain? She can only smile and urge him on.

The journey is dusty and hot. Margaret's eyes are riveted on the world outside the filthy truck windows, at the people, the children, the filth, the poverty. At the soldiers walking around proud and stiff, just like she remembers.

The truck goes slowly in the pothole-laden roads and her eyes roam the world, blinking back tears. The hours pass without conversation as she inhales dust and smells that torment her mind. Finally, she can see the flag with the cross and the sign for Calveston Enterprises.

As they enter the compound, she can see the tents, the sick, the injured, the children and her heart clenches. There should be a battalion of doctors and an army of nurses but there is only a handful of aid workers.

Everyone is at the Middle East. She knows why, of the need there. Still she cannot stop the pain from rising like fire in her throat. There at the distance is the white building with the red cross on top, the hospital. It looks almost deserted and she can feel panic rising in her gut.

Jack must have seen her fear. "She is still on the rounds."

Margaret nods with a twitch of her lips, almost a smile. *Yes, it's that time of day, early surgeries,*

*almost from dawn and then the rounds for as long as they take. It is almost noon.*

As soon as the truck stops, they get out. A small team of aid workers and people is there to greet them and unload the truck. Margaret can feel the burning of the sun on her as she takes up a box of medicine and walks quickly after an aid worker into the hospital.

As they enter the small building smelling of disease and antiseptic, she can't help but look around. The atmosphere is cold, impersonal. Her heart clenches, it looks like nothing she remembers. The tiny cubicle on the side, full of paper, claims her eyes as she walks blindly after the aid worker to the back and the apothecary.

A young man with ginger hair is there and his high-pitched voice assaults her. "Finally! Maybe the bear will get some aspirin for that sore tooth of hers."

The other aid worker laughs before he remembers Margaret and he looks back at her in apprehension. But the ginger-haired man has no such apprehension. "And who are you, darling?"

Margaret looks at the young man and smiles softly. "Margaret Foster. I am a nurse."

His answer holds laughter. "Uh...huh. I see. Well, darling, I hope you can deal with bears."

Margaret looks at him questioningly but before he can say a word, a voice sounds from outside. The two men flinch but Margaret is transfixed at the sound of the deep sonorous voice. She can hear it over the walls, not the words but the sound. *Bobbie.*

Almost like a sleepwalker, she follows the sound. She reaches the door of the building and squints against the sun, her heart hammering, her mind stalled. The voice sounds loud in her ears. "Good, Fred, good. We need the stuff... You got one? Any experience? Hmmm... Good. Well, where is she?"

Margaret can see Jack jumping from the back of the truck hitting the ground running but he is not fast enough as Fred turns towards the hospital door and points.

Bobbie turns and Margaret can feel the jolt that sends her a step backwards as their eyes meet. Her mind cannot help but see the details. Salt and pepper hair where there was only lustrous black. The whipcord strength that's still there.

She looks at the face that has accompanied her fevered dreams, her nightmares. The laugh lines are deeper now. She cannot stop the gasp that escapes her lips when she realises the difference. The scar down the side of a tanned face. *What had happened? Who had done that? Oh Bobbie.*

She is moving without realising it, a hand rising touching the scar. It is fully healed. Even to her worried eyes it looks old. She hears the words, it takes her a moment to recognise her own voice. "What happened? Who? Who did this?"

Blue eyes look into hers and Margaret feels like she is falling, the same blue eyes, the same hurt,

the same pain. The voice that answers her is deep, emotionless. "What are you doing here, Maggie?"

She cannot speak. What can she say?

Blue eyes drill into her as Fred speaks. "Ah...Dr. Rutherford, Ms. Foster is nurse I was telling you about."

Blue eyes do not move from hers. "I see."

Jack's voice is hesitant. "Bobbie?"

Margaret tries to speak. Her mouth moves but no words can climb over the knot in her throat. Blue eyes warm for a second as she struggles before they turn cold again. "Well in that case, Mother Superior, there is work to be done."

She cannot stand it any longer but she is too slow. Bobbie is already walking toward the hospital, broad shoulders tense.

Margaret looks at Jack. What can she say?

Fred's voice is trembling. "Mother Superior?"

She turns to look at the young man, at the horror in his eyes. Her words are choked but she can't help it. "Just Margaret, Fred."

She does not wait for his terrified nod as she turns and walks back to the hospital with large strides. The door to the small cubicle is closed. The aid workers are not speaking, merely glancing at the bowed head in the cubicle.

She breathes deeply trying to find courage somewhere in her heart. With hesitant steps, she enters the cubicle without knocking.

"Bobbie..." Her whisper sounds loud in the silence.

Blue eyes dark with anguish rise to meet hers but Bobbie's voice is cold. "Naim and George will help you with the rounds. Malnutrition, some seasonal fevers, gunshots and AIDS...the usual. I trust you have no problem dealing with these cases, Mother Superior."

The coldness hurts and it takes Margaret a moment to swallow the knot in her throat. "Not Mother Superior any more, Bobbie."

Blue eyes narrow for a split second but the words are small shards of ice. "Forgive me then, Sister Margaret. I was not aware. I am very sorry."

Margaret's voice cracks. "Not sister either, Bobbie."



Fists clench in a flash of anger. "What do you want?"

Her chest heaving, Margaret blinks to keep the tears from falling. "Just call me Maggie. Just Maggie."

She can only watch as Bobbie's head bows, blue eyes returning to the papers on the desk as the silence stretches. "Is there anything else, Nurse Foster?"

A part of her wants to run, hide, cry, but she cannot fault Bobbie. How can she? Margaret moves slowly around the tiny desk, her hand extending but not touching. Silently she stands there, torn by indecision.

The whisper is choked. "It's been fourteen years. What are you doing here? Now?"

What can she say? Words escape her as she touches a tense shoulder. Blue eyes turn to her as if her touch burns and she cannot stop the tears from her eyes.

Hard calloused hands tremble as they touch her cheeks, gently drying her tears, deep voice full of gentleness. "Go do your rounds, Maggie. There is work to be done."

She nods into the hands that cup her face, it seems like yesterday that she had heard those words before.

Long moments pass as Margaret stays immobile. Her feet refuse to move as her whole body tends towards the warmth of the large calloused hand touching her cheek. As the warmth finally recedes, Margaret shivers; it has been so long. Her feet shuffle as she hastens to leave the small office, she has rounds to do and her racing heart to calm down.

As she closes the door carefully, Margaret glances back toward Bobbie. Her heart clenches as she spies the hunched shoulders, the tightly closed eyes, the single tear making its way down a weathered cheek.

The End

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Thanks for reading. Any comments, good or bad, are welcome at [rh.black@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:rh.black@hotmail.co.uk) ~RB.